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Control of the Contras Is a Hazardous Illusion

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The *contras* trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua are not the first secret army organized and financed by the United States. We have been down this road before. If you know where to look you can find remnants—generally in dismal exile—of U.S.-backed rebel armies in the Ukraine, Albania, northern Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Tibet, Iraq, Angola and Cuba. I'm probably leaving a few out. Their fates have all been melancholy.

In the weeks before the CIA-mounted invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, Central Intelligence Agency Director Allen W. Dulles often fell back on his argument of last resort when President John F. Kennedy wavered and threatened to call the whole thing off. What about the rebel army? Dulles would ask. An army presents a serious "disposal problem." They were perhaps the strongest single military force in Central America. They had already put down an armed rebellion in Guatemala. They *wanted* to invade Cuba. If you asked them to turn in their guns they might not. Denied a chance to fight Fidel Castro, they might fight us. At the very least they certainly wouldn't have anything nice to say about the United States. Better to let the plan go forward.

Kennedy bought the argument. It could be fair to say that the United States backed an invasion of Cuba in April, 1961, because it didn't know what else to do with the rebel army it had organized for that purpose. Intended as a pliant tool, the army became a controlling fact. It's not hard to imagine a similar role for the *contras* in Honduras and Costa Rica—a force variously estimated at 10,000 to 20,000 armed men. The CIA created this army for President Reagan's use in a war of nerves with Nicaragua but last year Congress forced the CIA to abandon its role.

We are told the rebel army is now being "advised" and "directed" and even funded (with "donations" from "private" individuals) by a military officer on the National Security Council. It should be understood from the outset that this "control" is an illusion. Running an army takes more than a deep pocket. The CIA had long experience and a large cadre of trained men; the NSC has neither. Thus we—the general public, watching the drama unfold through the newspapers—now find ourselves forced to worry about not one but three loose cannons on the deck: the *contra* army, which may not be willing to call it a day when Washington thinks it convenient; the NSC, which may find it likes running secret wars without kibitzing from Congress, and the "private" funding apparat, which will undoubtedly expect some sort of reward from a grateful President (just as conventional political contributors do), and which, developing a taste for direct action abroad, may draw up an agenda of its own going beyond the war against Soviet penetration of Central America.

This miserable but familiar mess is best understood as a constitutional crisis, triggered by the inherent difficulties of running a global foreign policy in a democracy when governors and governed do not fear the same things. The plain fact is that the American government and the American people parted ways long ago on the subject of the "Soviet threat." In dismal succession Washington has attempted to defeat Soviet-backed military forces in Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Ethiopia and Central America—secretly when possible, openly when there was no other way.

Official Washington had few doubts about the Soviet role in these conflicts; the real argument was about limits—just how far should the United States go to defeat Soviet allies and proxies? The problem was the staying power of the American public in a conventional war—a matter of real political significance to any President set on reelection. Korea and Vietnam both suggest that the public patience runs out in a hurry. Lyndon B. Johnson, like Harry S. Truman, read the New Hampshire tea leaves and decided to retire. Americans do not like long inconclusive wars. Hence the frequent resort to covert action and secret armies. It's a question of expedience, not preference.

In Washington, on almost any day of the week, one can find a roomful of people from the national-security community wringing their hands about the success of Soviet "salami tactics." You may find it hard to believe that grown men would feel genuine alarm at the "loss" of Southern Yemen, Ethiopia, Afghanistan or El Salvador. The last is as poor and problematic as the rest. What possible difference can it make whose ambassador has the leader of El Salvador in his pocket? But the national-security people don't see it this way. In their view every toehold is a potential problem for the other side in the event of a big general war. Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador aren't going to invade the United States—that's obvious—but while we were busy taking care of them in a major war, the Soviets might be halfway to the Atlantic, or the Persian Gulf, or both.

The argument here is between government and people, not Republicans and Democrats. Either one of the latter, out of power, may criticize Washington's secret war of the moment for the record, but postwar history suggests pretty clearly that both parties share a common dread of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary groups hoping to join the socialist camp. It's the American body politic that objects to dirty little wars and refuses to fight in them. It isn't the money; even large sums, hidden in the budget, have passed

through Congress without difficulty for years. It's the prospect of sending Americans to fight and die in some miserable jungle that wrecks the plans of national-security planners. Would the public be surprised, or much upset, if the rebels came to power in El Salvador and followed the usual pattern—sent young men to Bulgaria for pilot training, invited East Germans to organize the secret police, signed a coffee export agreement with Moscow, denounced Israel in the U.N., invited U.S. church groups to send volunteers to help with the harvest, doubled the price of newsprint for the bourgeois press, appointed the widow of a moderate leader to be minister of feminist affairs and provided office space for the National Liberation Fronts of Guatemala and Honduras? I doubt it. The national security community in Washington would be beside itself with fury and frustration but the general public of the United States—and of Britain, France and West Germany, for that matter—simply does not believe that a string of impoverished states with big militias and a dull night life adds up to a genuine threat, no matter how flowery the annual cable of compliments to Moscow on the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution.

The break is complete. Foreign policy-makers in Washington have been worried about Soviet "subversion" for 40 years. If the public ever troubled itself about this, it has quit. Ordinary citizens simply do not care who runs Vietnam, Afghanistan or El Salvador—not enough, at any rate, to fund a serious war, much less send their sons to fight it. Through long and bitter experience, official Washington has learned that the only way to conduct the shooting part of its global rivalry with the Soviet Union is secretly. As the public grows more sophisticated, this becomes harder to do. Refusing to take no for an answer, the Administration must run further to get round the end. Now it is stepping outside the bounds of government (and of the Constitution) in order to maintain a degree of pressure on Nicaragua that Congress is unwilling to support.

How Congress will deal with this challenge is hard to say. Legend tells us that when Benjamin Franklin came out of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia he was asked by a woman what sort of government we were to have. He answered, "A republic, madam—if you can keep it." I begin to see what was troubling him. □

Thomas Powers, author of "The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA," is now working on a book about strategic weapons.